

INTRODUCTION

INTERAGENCY FIRE PROGRAM MANAGEMENT QUALIFICATIONS STANDARDS AND GUIDE

BACKGROUND

On July 6, 1994, a combination of firefighting resources including helitack, smokejumpers and interagency hotshot crews were assigned to the South Canyon Fire west of Glenwood Springs, Colorado. A dry cold front with very strong winds passed over the area that afternoon causing all 49 firefighters to abandon the fireline in an attempt to escape the 100 foot flames of the rekindled inferno. Thirty-five firefighters survived; 14 died.

An interagency team was formed to investigate the fatalities and contributing factors. The South Canyon Fire Investigation Report was published on August 17, 1994. As a result, the Acting Director, Bureau of Land Management, and the Chief, Forest Service, established the Interagency Management Review Team (IMRT) to serve as a steering group, study the findings and conclusions of the Investigation Team, and propose a plan for corrective action.

Management Actions and Expectations

On October 17, 1994, the Report of the Interagency Management Review Team was published. It included, among others, these recommendations (IMRT Topic 3.6):

1. "Establish minimum qualifications for fire managers and agency administrators who are required to make fire management decisions."
2. "Agency Administrators should ensure that personnel holding, or selected for, fire management or agency administrator positions are qualified for the level of wildland fire complexity involved in the position or are able to obtain these qualifications within an acceptable time period."

(Up to that time, no federal wildland fire management agency had adopted fire program management qualifications on a service-wide basis. Certainly, none existed on a common interagency basis.)

On December 18, 1995, the U.S. Department of Interior and the U.S. Department of Agriculture published the final report of the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy and Program Review (Federal Fire Policy). Signed by both Department Secretaries, it directed the federal agencies to:

"establish fire management qualifications based on program complexity, and staff existing and future agency administrator and fire management vacancies with individuals who meet

these qualifications and who are committed to accomplishing the total fire management program.”

On May 23, 1996, the U.S. Department of Interior and the U.S. Department of Agriculture published the Implementation Action Plan Report outlining action items which must be accomplished by the signatory agencies to fully implement the Federal Fire Policy. Several action items are specific to the development of qualifications for agency administrators and personnel assigned fire management duties including:

Action Item 27. “establish fire management qualifications based on program complexity, and staff existing and future agency administrator and fire management vacancies with individuals who meet these qualifications and who are committed to accomplishing the total fire management program.”

Action Item 62, “Develop and utilize consistent fire management qualification standards and specific selection criteria for fire program managers.”

Action Item 63: “Establish job performance standards for Agency Administrators and fire managers that clearly reflect the complexity and scope of fire management responsibilities.”

Throughout this time, various efforts were underway to address recognized fire program qualifications deficiencies, both coincidental to and as a result of the IMRT Report and the Federal Fire Policy Review. These efforts included:

- ◆ In July, 1995, as part of a servicewide revision of its career development program, the National Park Service (NPS) convened an interagency task group at the National Interagency Fire Center to identify essential competencies (a combination of vital knowledge, skills and abilities) for selected fire management positions. While this effort addressed NPS concerns, it was felt that the other four federal wildland fire management agencies might also benefit and contribute significantly to the project. It was also considered an initial step towards meeting the IMRT 3.6 recommendation. An “Interagency Task Group Report: Federal Fire and Aviation Management Competencies” was produced in August, 1995.
- ◆ In August, 1995, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) conducted an internal National Fire & Aviation Review. A significant outcome was the establishment of performance standards for BLM agency administrators and fire program managers. Subsequently, in April, 1996, the BLM established qualification standards for six key fire program positions.
- ◆ In December, 1996, the BLM implemented interim standards to reduce inconsistencies in qualifications and classification of fire management positions in the GS-401 series.

The Federal Fire and Aviation Leadership Council (FFALC: the respective Fire Directors of the USDA-Forest Service, and USDI-Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service) combined the IMRT Action Item 3.6 with action items #27, 28, 62, 63, and 64 of the “Implementation Action Report Plan” for the “Federal

Wildland Fire Management Policy and Program Review, 12/95." To accomplish these action items, the FFALC formed an Interagency Fire Program Management Qualifications task group. An initial meeting was held in July, 1997.

Further support for interagency fire program management competencies and qualifications was identified in the "Wildland Firefighter Safety Awareness Study", a FFALC-sponsored study contracted to the Tridata Corporation. In March, 1998, Tridata Corporation released its Phase III Report, "Implementing Cultural Changes for Safety." In chapter 4, "Leadership and Fire Management", the Report identified three goals for achieving leadership experience and competence:

"Goal 42: Fire experience and competency should be considered as critical selection factors for fire leadership and fire management positions."

"Goal 43: All personnel in a given position must meet the performance requirements of that position."

"Goal 44: Fire Management Officers (FMO's) must be selected from among those with fire backgrounds."

The Implementation Strategy for accomplishing these goals is to "Set and enforce minimum requirements for key leadership positions."

